



## SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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**WHERE IS THE KOTEL?**

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# Vayeitze

## Where is the Kotel?

Good Shabbos!

Famous Israeli Knesset Member and former Refusenik Yuli Edelstein tells the following story:

When he was a young college student in Communist Russia in 1979, he tried to make Aliyah to Israel and became an enemy of the state overnight. He was thrown out of his university.

So he moved to Moscow and joined a group that was studying Hebrew. In Moscow, he sought out Judaism and got close to the underground efforts of Chabad.

He recounts how hard it was to live as a Jew then in Russia. He remembers davening with a minyan on Yom Kippur with “Reb Mottel Der Shoichet,” Rabbi Mordechai Lifshitz, of blessed memory—a leader of the Chabad underground who only left Russia well after the Iron Curtain fell.

At the time, however, Reb Mottel was serving as chazzan for the Neilah prayer. Now normally, Neilah ends with the declaration, “L’shanah haba’ah b’Yirushalayim!” Next year in Jerusalem! But in Russia in the early 1980s, the mention of Jerusalem was banned because if you said “Jerusalem,” you could be suspected of Zionism! So Reb Mottel only whispered it quietly, and only those standing closest to him could hear it.

Eventually, Yuli Edelstein became a Hebrew teacher, got arrested by the KGB who accused him of possession of drugs (which were really Havdalah spices), and he was sentenced to three years in a labor camp in the Gulag.

Mr. Edelstein recounts how at the start of his court case, he did not cooperate with his interrogator. The interrogator would ask him questions in Russian and he would respond in Hebrew. So the interrogator once asked him, “What would you need to get for you to cooperate with me?” Yuli replied that he couldn’t even talk to him before he said his daily prayers—and to pray, he needed tefillin. So the interrogator immediately told him, “If that’s the case, tell your wife Tanya to bring your tefillin to the prison, and I’ll transfer them to you.”

So Mrs. Edelstein arrived with the tefillin, and the prison officers opened the bags and discovered that they had leather straps attached to them.

Now, everyone knows that the straps are an integral part of the tefillin. Maybe even the guards knew that, too. Regardless, they wouldn’t allow them into the prison because of the possibility that a prison might use them to commit suicide. However, they were ready to give him his tefillin without the straps.

So Mrs. Edelstein approached Rabbi Vilenkin, the spiritual leader of the Chabad Chasidim in Moscow of that time. He was known as Reb Getcheh. She asked him what to do. He told her to pass to him whatever she could, and so one fine day after that, Yuli Edelstein got a pair of tefillin without straps in prison. He would put the head tefillin on his head under a hat, and the arm tefillin he would hold in his hand against his biceps—and so he “put on” tefillin.

Things went on for almost three months like that until the interrogation concluded. Then, one day, the guards came in to search his cell. They looked and looked and finally set their sights on the tefillin.

One of the guards wanted to break open the tefillin boxes to see if there were “drugs” inside. Yuli tried to stop him, but five guards overpowered him and carted him off to 15 days in solitary confinement.

During that time, Mrs. Edelstein conducted a hunger strike for 40 days (I guess she ate at night, or only drank water) to protest the government not setting her husband free. She got to the point where her loss of energy was nearly absolute—but she then got a message from the Rebbe asking her to call the hunger strike off.

In 1987, Mr. and Mrs. Edelstein were freed and made Aliyah to Israel.

When they landed at the airport in Tel Aviv, they were greeted by many admirers and friends who had been worried about their wellbeing and had worked for their safety and freedom over the years. But then, somebody told him that a royal reception was waiting for him at the Kotel, the Western Wall—with the attendance of the Prime Minister and representatives of the government—and so he’d better hurry.

A car (with a Russian driver, actually) was waiting for him on the tarmac to drive him directly to Jerusalem. But when they actually approached the city, the driver—who had already been living in Israel for seven years, asked his passenger, “Where to?”

Mr. Edelstein said, “I need to get to the Kotel!”

The driver asked, “Cottage?”

“Kotel! Not ‘Cottage’!”

The driver said that he had never heard of the place. He was always taking new olim to Jerusalem, and taking them to immigrant absorption centers, but he had never heard of the Kotel.

Somehow, they got to the Old City, and Yuli Edelstein recognized the walls of the Old City from pictures he had seen before. But how to get to the actual Kotel, this the driver could not figure out.

Now Yuli Edelstein was under such pressure that he wanted to get out of the car and march up to the Kotel by foot. But then the driver got out of the car, threw his arms wide and cried out, “Where’s the Kotel? Where’s the Kotel?” And three teenagers walking by said, “If you’ll give us a hitch, we’ll show you how to get to the Kotel!”

So here you have a hero of Jewish history, a Russian taxi driver in Israel who doesn't know where the Kotel is, and three Israeli teenagers, all in the same taxi meeting each other for the first time. Only in Israel, huh?

But it gets funnier.

So the three young guys get into the car. The one sitting next to Yuli Edelstein turns to him and says with a smile, "Well, what do you think—Edelstein got the Kotel already?"

Yuli Edelstein finishes the story by saying, "Take a look at what happened here. Here you have a Jew who in the 1980s dared to present a request for an exit visa from Russia, finally actually gets it, makes Aliyah to Israel and lives there for seven years, and no one had bothered to teach him the difference between the Kotel and a cottage. This Jew had never heard at all of the holiest place for the Jewish Nation!"

But let's allow Mr. Edelstein to relax a bit—that Russian Jew wasn't the first to not know where the Kotel was.

In this week's Torah portion of Vayitzei, right at the beginning, we read about Yaakov Avinu: "and Yaakov departed from B'eir Shava and went toward Charan." And then, on the way, "He encountered the place and lay down there for the sun had set... and he slept in that place."

And then, he had a dream in which he saw: "A ladder placed on the ground with its head reaching the heavens, and behold, angels of G-d were rising and descending on it." And then, "Behold, G-d stood before him," and He promised to him the land upon which he was lying.

G-d also promised him the verse made famous by Chabad: "Uforatzta" And you shall spread forth to the west, east, north and south." Where does that Chabad song come from? From this week's Torah portion—it's the promise given to Yaakov on that night; and G-d ends the promise with the words, "And behold, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go."

Then, the Torah tells us, "And Yaakov woke from his sleep and said, 'G-d indeed is in this place, and I did not know!'"

Now, where was this "place" at which Yaakov didn't know that G-d was located? Rashi says: "This was Mt. Moriah, upon which the verse states, 'And he saw the *place* from afar.'"

So Yaakov Avinu, the third and greatest of the Patriarchs, was the first Jew to "not know where the Kotel is"—he didn't know that the place upon which he was sleeping was Mt. Moriah, where the Kotel is located today, a holy site. And it was Yaakov Avinu who designated the place as "the Gate of Heaven," the "place of prayer to lift their prayers to heaven," as Rashi (Bereishis 28:17) explains it.

And ever since then, we have known that this is the place through which all our prayers rise to Heaven—the "Gate of Heaven."

So what's the lesson for us?

A Jew can live his entire life as if in a dream. He or she can strive and rise and work and play, run back and forth and do all the ordinary things that people do, and never notice that “G-d indeed is in this place”—never notice all the small miracles happening all around him or her.

This Jew may never notice how something worked out for him here, or how she ran into a dear friend and struck a great business deal there—he or she is sleeping, in a spiritual trance.

Now why does such a thing happen?

The Zohar points out something very interesting: When Yaakov woke up from his sleep, his exact words were, “Achein yeish Hashem bamakom hazeh, *v’anochi* lo yadati!”—G-d indeed is in this place, and I did not know!

In Hebrew, there are two words for “I”—*ani* and *anochi*. Here, Yaakov uses the word “anochi,” while the standard and far more common word is *ani*. So Yaakov really should have said, “*va’ani* lo yadati!” Why did he say “anochi”?

So the Zohar explains that the “anochi” here hints to another appearance of “anochi” in the Torah.

Where else do we find the word “anochi” in the Torah? [Interact with audience]

Yup, it’s right at the very beginning of the the Ten Commandments—which begin with, “Anochi Hashem Elokecha,” “I am the L-rd your G-d.”

Says the Zohar: What causes the Jew to not notice that “G-d is in this place”? Anochi, I did not know! When the Jew does not know the Anochi, the I, of the Ten Commandment, it’s not that he or she has forgotten that there is a G-d, but rather, that he or she does not “know” Him.

What does that all practically mean?

In the Torah portion of Vayeira, we find G-d saying about Avraham, “Ki yidativ”—for I know him. And Rashi comments, “[it’s] a term of endearment” (Bereishis 18:19). Thus, “knowing” is not just a matter of information, meaning, knowing that there must be a Creator; “knowing” means to cherish and love—and when one loves G-d, then one makes every place a house of G-d and a gate to Heaven, one discovers G-d everywhere in the world.